

# Chapter Ten: The Spiritual Dimension of Trauma

## I. Introduction

Beliefs and values are at the heart of spirituality. The legend of the Sky Maiden, derived from West Africa, provides insights into different belief systems and their impact on everyday existence. While it may appear to be a morality story about trust or curiosity, it is clear from the Sky Maiden's statement that she expected her husband to break his promise, his failure to recognize what she valued broke their relationship.

*Once upon a time there was a tribe that was greatly blessed. It owned cattle and lands that produced fruits and vegetables in great abundance. But over time, tribe members noticed that their lands and cows were producing less and less milk and food. They could not understand why. The harder they worked, the less was available.*

*One young warrior decided to find out what was happening. He thought that perhaps someone in the tribe was taking more than his share of food or that thieves from other tribes were stealing the food at night. So he stayed up all night day after day looking for the thief. Finally, one night he saw a wondrous sight. A beautiful young woman descended from the stars carrying several large baskets. She milked the cows, picked vegetables and fruits and filled all of the baskets to the brim. She then returned to the stars.*

*The warrior was entranced. So he set a trap for her and continued his vigil until she returned again. When she descended, he captured her. He asked what she was doing and where she had come from.*

*She said that she was a member of a tribe in the stars. She told him that they had little food of their own*

*and so she came down to find food for her community. She asked him to release her and let her go home.*

*He agreed on the condition that she return and marry him. She promised to return in three days.*

*When she came back she was carry a large box. She told the young warrior that she would marry him, but he must promise never to look in the box.*

*For months the couple was very happy with one another. But, one day when his wife had left to gather food, the warrior's curiosity got the best of him and he opened the box. He was amazed! There was nothing in it.*

*When the young woman returned, she soon realized that her husband was staring at her as though she was very, very strange. She gasped and turned pale. "You looked inside the box. I can't stay here anymore."*

*He replied, "That's ridiculous. There is no reason for you to leave. There was nothing in the box."*

*She said sadly, "I am sorry. Its not that you looked into the box. I expected you might grow curious. But, you see, I filled my box in the stars with everything that was important to me in my world: the air, the smells, the sights, the sounds, the tastes."*

*"I can't love you anymore now that I know that you find those treasures to be nothing."*

## **II. Why Spiritual Issues are Important**

### **A. Spirituality defined**

The spiritual dimension of life refers to the essential core of values and the animating force within human beings. It is the source of connection between people, nature, and the world. For some people, their spiritual essence may relate to a belief in God or Gods. For some, religious principles guide their understanding of spirituality. For most, their sense of spirituality helps to define their value systems. The term spirituality is used in this manual to encompass the understanding of the meaning of the universe and the meaning of life. While much of this chapter refers to concepts in

traditional religion, it does so by way of illustration rather than to suggest any particular belief system. Because the Judeo-Christian faith systems are dominant in the United States, many of the references are to theologians and researchers of this tradition. However, most of the conceptual questions that are raised or discussed seem to apply within other belief systems, although cultures based on such belief systems may arrive at very different answers.

*All religions teach us to help people whenever we can. All religions teach us to play fair and not to hit or kill or steal or cheat. All religions teach us we should be forgiving and cut people some slack when they mess up, because someday we will mess up too. All religions teach us to love our families, to respect our parents and to make new families when we grow up. Religions all over the world teach the same right way to live.*

– Rabbi Marc Gellman and Msgr. Thomas Hartman,  
*How Do You Spell God?*, New York, NY: Morrow & Co.

Spiritual beliefs combine concepts of philosophy or theology that seek to explain being (existence), nothingness (nonexistence), relationships, time and eternity, space and infinity, life, death, and afterlife. Spiritual beliefs are most often determined by culture.

*Any attempt to combine spirituality with psychotherapy must make a distinction between spirituality and religion ... spirituality is seen as our search for purpose and meaning involving both transcendence (the experience of existence beyond the physical/psychological) and immanence (the discovery of the transcendent in the physical/psychological). Religion can be considered as the organized attempt to facilitate and interpret that search.*

– Larry Decker

**B. Traumatic events are an attack on meaning systems.** (The following constructs were developed with the assistance of A. Robert Denton)

1. One's meaning system is comprised of four factors:
  - a. What one believes about the universe.
  - b. The nature of reality.
  - c. One's relationship to the universe and reality.
  - d. The search for meaning within that reality and universe.
2. Meaning systems are axiomatic.
  - a. They are assumed to be philosophical or faith statements.
  - b. They are the paradigms or world views which circumscribe reality by providing explanations for experience, and have a particular structure.
  - c. Considerations of such paradigms lead directly into the realms of spirituality, religion and philosophy.
3. The structure and function of the spiritual as a system of meaning.
  - a. Structure

The structure might best be understood as a vertical framework or ladder of varying types of knowledge in which each type is legitimated by that which supersedes it. See the "Structure of Knowledge" Chart on the next page.
  - b. Function

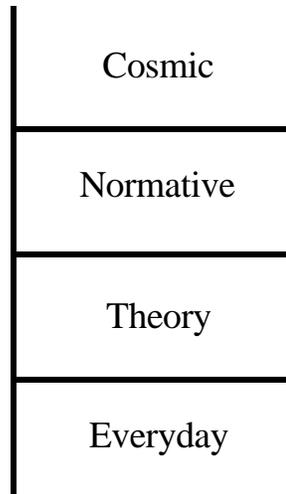
At each rung of the ladder, each type of knowledge has a specific function to perform in creating an understanding of what has happened at any particular time.

    - Everyday life knowledge relies upon ordinary information being organized and processed in the cognitive systems as well as the emotional experience of traumatic events.

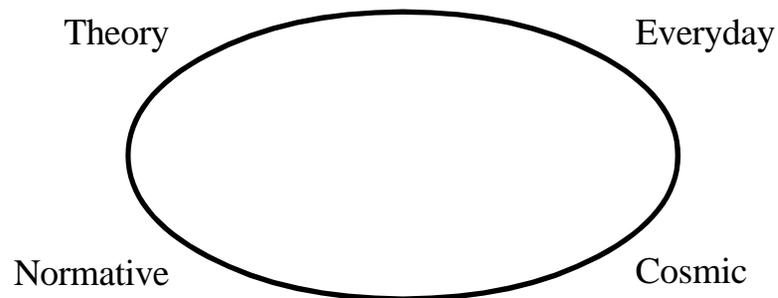
*Survivors of homicide victims know the pain and grief of sudden, random arbitrary loss caused by human violence.*

## The Structure of Knowledge

### Viewed as a hierarchy



### Viewed as an interactive process



- Theoretical knowledge helps to frame everyday life knowledge into typologies, patterns, and organizational constructs that provide expanded abilities to describe, intervene or cope with the totality of the experience.

*Survivors of homicide victims may better understand their own reactions, and how they relate to others, through an understanding of crisis theory or posttraumatic stress theory.*

- Normative knowledge is derived from cultural values of good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust, harmony or disharmony, and individual or social ethical constructs. These ethical or moral precepts may be perceived as absolutes in which actions may be juxtaposed or judged, or as everchanging in which actions are a part of a process in which there may be shifts and changes in the flow towards evolving understandings.

*Survivors of homicide victims usually respond to their reactions and understandings of those reactions based on their normative knowledge. In different cultural contexts, some may see justice as being done when an offender is given the death penalty; others may see justice done when offenders can be restored to society.*

- Cosmic knowledge is garnered by understandings of relationships between people and things in the universe, their nature, their connections and their meanings.

*Survivors of homicide victims may interpret their need to see justice done through the execution of the death penalty because their pain is viewed as injustice and God has dictated that, when injustice is done, it is only remedied through a similar punishment of the offender.*

4. Many in the helping professions limit their understanding and interest in what happens in a traumatic event to the everyday life knowledge and the theoretical knowledge. In doing so they miss two vital species of knowledge that are necessary to order and legitimate the common sense and theoretical levels of understanding.

Individuals facing trauma usually reexamine their beliefs and their sense of meaning in the immediate aftermath of tragedy and over time. Sometimes their faith in their values and beliefs is shattered by a personal or community disaster.

Most people grow up believing or thinking they should believe in a just and fair world. Random, arbitrary tragedy is not just. Some people develop a belief that there is a purpose to all things but after a severe trauma, feel abandoned by God and bewildered when they try to divine a higher purpose in agony or massive suffering. Some people may have found their reason for being in caring for their family and loving their children. If their children are killed or their family destroyed by a catastrophe, they may feel lost, alone and betrayed.

Some people find meaning in their connection to cultural communities or cultural identities. When hate violence and genocide threaten or destroy those cultural ties, they may feel they have nothing left to live for. The reconstruction of a meaning system is sometimes the most difficult challenge victims and survivors of disaster face. It requires an inward search into one's past, one's identity, and one's faith. It is no wonder that many turn away from previous meaning systems or that many seek out clergy, elders, shamans, philosophers and others to help them in their quest.

Traumatic events challenge the presuppositions about the world held by individuals, communities and cultures. These challenges include:

- a. Assumptions about the relationships and connections between the universe, the world,

people, things, or God, spirits, being or nothingness.

- b. Assumptions about life, death, or afterlife.
- c. Assumptions about principles and values.
- d. Assumptions about how the world may be understood.
- e. Assumptions about how everyday life should be lived.

*Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life – out of your past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. You are the only one who can put these ingredients together into that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be one that has dignity and meaning for you.*

– John W. Gardner

5. If tragedy may shake an individual's meaning system, it may also shatter communities' faith systems. Faith communities may become divided by the differing reactions of their members to a disaster. Often the leadership in a faith community has a pivotal role in mitigating divisions and providing guidance in sustaining spiritual ties among the membership. This may be difficult since trauma's effects are not only physiologically, emotionally, and cognitively in each individual but the effects may provoke profound individual spiritual change.

*From a faith perspective, tragedy may impact its victims in one of three ways.*

1. *Faith is unchanged...*
2. *Faith is rejected. A rejected faith is often the result of a conviction that "God has done this to me" and "I'll get even by rejecting Him ... "*

*3. Faith is transformed. This faith may have a basis in prior belief, or it may not. It is a faith, however, that has been radically transformed and deepened by a tragedy that could have been totally destructive of one's spirituality. It has not come without struggle or doubts, questions or even momentary denials ... A transformed faith implies that one's belief that "that which has broken me can help to transform me."*

– Rev. Michael T. Mannion, "Making Sense of Victimization Through a Spiritual Vision", in *2001: The Next Generation in Victim Assistance*, Young, M.A., Stein, J.H., Kendall/Hunt: Dubuque, IA, 1994.

### **C. Evidence of effectiveness of religion or spiritual faith in coping with trauma**

#### **1. Preventive and healing effects of spiritual faith.**

More doctors and scientists seem to be recognizing the positive benefits of faith in responding to physical and emotional distresses. An explanation of why there is a connection between a sense of spirituality and health is less clear. It could be because it tends to be associated with optimism and hope which are antidotes to negative emotions. It could be because spirituality is often based on beliefs in universal connections among others, and hence bolsters the positive effects of social support. It could be because spirituality usually reduces the fear response in the body and mitigates the constant ravages of stress and anxieties. Whatever the reasons, more studies are taking place to document the effects of spiritual faith.

- a. In a 1995 report on 232 people who underwent elective open-heart surgery, those who received no strength or comfort from religion were more likely to die within six months.
- b. A decade-long study of 2,700 people showed that, after accounting for risk factors, only one social attribute – increased church attendance – lowered mortality rates.

- c. Among women recovering from hip fractures, those with stronger religious beliefs and practices were less depressed and could walk further at discharge.
- d. In a rigorously controlled study of elderly women, the less religious had mortality levels twice that of the faithful.
- e. A review of 200 epidemiological studies suggests that religion has positive effects on diseases, ranging from cervical cancer to stroke. [“Faith in Psychiatry,” *Psychology Today*, July/August, 1995 citing to studies done by David Larson, psychiatrist and president of the National Institute for Health Care Research.]

*Prayer is a force as real as terrestrial gravity. As a physician, I have seen men, after all other therapy has failed, lifted out of disease and melancholy by the serene effort of prayer. It is the only power in the world that seems to overcome the so-called “laws of nature”; the occasions on which prayer has dramatically done this have been termed “miracles.” But a constant, quieter miracle takes play hourly in the hearts of men and women who have discovered that prayer supplies them with a steady flow of sustaining power in their daily lives.*

– Dr. Alexis Carrel in *Fields of Gold*, compiled by Priscilla Shepard, The C.R. Gibson Co:Norwalk, CT, 1975.

2. Research indicates that people in trauma utilize spiritual “tools” to come to grips with overwhelming events. The following summary of some of the existing research is drawn from “Trauma and Spirituality: Structure, Some Research Implications for Intervention and Coping Styles” a paper by Robert Denton, Adjunct Professor of Sociology, The University of Akron.

- a. Meaning and purpose are critical forces in stress resistance.  
The variable of commitment (meaning and purpose) is one of three critical forces which determine stress resistance. (Maton, K. I., "The stress-buffering role of spiritual support: cross-sectional and prospective investigations," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1989)
- b. Causal explanations of trauma are a function of religion and abnormal events trigger religious attributions.  
The attributional theories of religiosity concern themselves with the individual's need to make sense of the world. The causal explanations are a hallmark of religion and a person's need for such meaning is a motivating factor in behavior. Religion is a basic source of meaning and an agency of control through worship and prayer.  
There is an important distinction between people's predisposition to use both religious and nonreligious attributions to make sense out of life's events. The nature of the event influences which style of attributions will be drawn upon. Abnormal events or those beyond the everyday coping system tend to trigger religious attributions. (Splika, Bernard, Shaver, Phillip, & Kirkpatrick, Lee A., "A general attribution theory for the psychology of religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1985)
- c. Religion is used as emotional support and assists cognitive structuring.  
The role of religion in an individual's life is used most extensively for emotional support and as a means of making sense of a problem cognitively. Deaths and injury elicit increased religious problem solving in many cases. (Newman, Jon and Pargament, K.I., "The role of religion in the problem-solving process," *Review of Religious Research*, 1990)

It is important to note that cognitive perception is one the critical variables of crisis theory that both influences the extent of a crisis reaction and the construction of a narrative after a crisis experience. Hence, religion is used in cognitive restructuring after trauma.

- d. Religion is used by victims to cope emotionally and solve problems.

The results of Newman and Pargament's study was replicated in a study of victims of violent crime. It was concluded that victims cope emotionally with death and injury or other crisis situations by using religion as either an emotional support or problem solving tool. 67% of victims of violence reported turning to God for help in coping and 47% indicated they turned to their church for assistance. (Bulan, H., *Victimization and Forgiveness: The Role of Religiosity in the Coping Process*, Master's Thesis, Dept. of Sociology, the University of Akron, 1993)

- e. Three problem solving styles are used when utilizing religion as a coping strategy.

Three distinct styles of problem solving which underlie individuals' relationships to God in terms of locus of control have been identified: self-directing, deferring and collaborative. The collaborative style was the most common form of religious coping. The perception of God as a partner in the coping process was associated with positive outcomes. (Pargament, Kenneth I., Kennel, Joseph, Hathaway, William, Grevengoed, Nancy, Newman, Jon, & Jones, Wendy, "Religion and the problem-solving process: three styles of coping," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1988)

- f. The potential of religious assistance is a positive operative force.

Just knowing that one can seek the help of God if needed facilitates the buffer process

- against stress. The same is true of religious support systems, e.g., knowing the availability of a pastor, church, parish, etc. (Maton, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1989)
- g. Measures of religiosity are strong predictors and positively relate to the quality of life.

Measures of religiosity are strong predictors of personal ability to handle deliberate injury and are positively correlated with quality of life variables. Individuals who engage themselves in meditative, colloquial or ritual prayer “are more likely to respond in a healthy manner when wronged than those who do not.”

Poloma, Margaret & Gallup, George, *Unless You Forgive Others: Forgiveness, Prayer and Life Satisfaction*, Paper presented at the meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Virginia Beach, VA, November, 1990; Poloma & Gallup, *Varieties of Prayer*, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991)

#### **D. Reconstruction of life through prayer and ritual**

1. The power of prayer
  - a. Prayer, in the religious sense, may be a source of ventilation and validation for people of faith.
    - The idea of communicating with God and having a “ready ear” for our sorrows, our joys, our search for understanding, and our quests for assistance is well-documented in the Scriptures, Greek mythologies, the Talmud, the Koran, and other religious texts. “Hear my prayer, O Lord,” is an example of asking God to listen to one’s ventilation. Praying to ancestors or the spirit world is another form of ventilation. In describing the ritual of the sweat lodge used by traditional Oglalas, one author uses the following song of prayer as an illustration of how the sacred person addresses the spirits:

*Wankatakiya hoyewaye lo.  
Cannunpa kin yuha hoyewaye lo.  
“Mitakuye ob wani ktie ca lecamun welo,”  
Eyaya Tunkasila cewakiye lo.*

*I send a voice above.  
With this pipe, I send a voice above.  
“I do this because I want to live with my relatives,”  
Saying this over and over, I pray to grandfather.*

*After each round of prayers and songs, the participants say, “Mitak`oyasin” (all my relations).*

*– Powers, W.K., Oglala Religion, Lincoln, NB: First Bison Book Printing, University of Nebraska, 1982.*

- When someone prays with another, the experience of prayer is also one of communion with others. Not only is there ventilation to God, but there is validation with the others who also partake in the service.

*A patient of mine was dying. The day before his death, I sat at his bedside with his wife and children. He knew he had little time left, and he chose his words carefully, speaking in a hoarse whisper. Although he was not a religious person, he revealed to us that he recently had begun to pray. “What do you pray for?” I asked him. “It isn’t ‘for’ anything,” he said thoughtfully. “It simply reminds me that I am not alone.”*

*Prayer is like that. It is a reminder of our unbounded nature, of the part of us that is infinite in space and time. It is the universe’s affirmation that we are not alone.*

*– Dossey, L., Healing Words, San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1993*

- b. Prayer also serves as a source of stress moderation.

- Meditation has long been noted as a form of therapy for dealing with stress. Although meditation therapy or interventions have been controversial because some people have used them to make substantial profits, research suggests that repeating words or phrases can replace arousing thoughts and have beneficial physiological effects. Prayer explicitly is meditation.

*Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my meditation.  
Hearken unto the voice of my cry, my King, and my  
God: for unto thee will I pray.  
– The Holy Bible, Psalms, 5, 1-2*

- Repetition is a key factor in prayers. Most major religious traditions use simple repetitive prayers as a central part of meditation. Some people feel that meaningful phrases are also effective because they keep the attention of the person praying.
  - The process of prayer often incorporates elements of relaxation techniques that assist in stress reduction.
- c. Prayer is a form of spiritual processing.
- Prayer allows individuals to present their perceptions and reactions to God or a spiritual being, and pray for answers or understanding.
  - Prayer provides a period of time in which the whole focus of the survivors or victims is concentrated on developing their understanding of what happened as well as trying to integrate that understanding with their belief systems.
  - Incorporating the prayers of others in an individual's prayer may provide an opportunity to integrate new perspectives that are consistent with existing beliefs.

*Spiritual processing embraces a holistic view of the person ... as the individual analyzes the traumatic event, personal behavior, and emotional experiences in terms of seven essentially spiritual dimensions: (1) distrust and fear, (2) rejection and betrayal, (3) futility, (4) alienation and estrangement, (5) loss and grief, (6) guilt and shame, and (7) isolation and withdrawal.*

– Robert D. Parlotz, *Trauma Pastoral Care: Part 1 – An Affective-Cognitive-Spiritual Adaptation Theory.*

2. The power of ritual
  - a. Ritual is a primary source of social integration and support. Most spiritual rituals involve connecting and strengthening the bonds of individuals to the community and traditions in which they live. They help people face joys and sorrows together. Traditional rituals are participated in by all community members from the time of birth, thus providing a ready mechanism for processing distress or disaster, and celebration or hope.
    - The customs of sitting shiva, having a wake, or having a funeral procession are all examples of rituals that bring together community support for loved ones after death.
    - Rituals of atonement, forgiveness, or remembrance serve purposes of release and commemoration.
  - b. Ritual may be a way to continue communication with loved ones.
  - c. At times, rituals are developed with a specific goal of integrating tragedy into an individual's life and belief systems in the aftermath of the disaster. They may be enshrined in traditional ceremonies but given specific meaning in relationship to a particular event or person. This use of ritual has been applied to the treatment of traumatic stress syndromes with Vietnam veterans.

*The [Native American] ceremonial and purification rituals used to reintegrate warriors into their communities have been found particularly valuable for Vietnam veterans. These rituals involve community support, giving the warriors a meaningful place within the cultural context, honoring them for their sacrifices, and diminishing their sense of isolation and withdrawal.*

*In addition, purification in the sweat lodge ritual also holds physical, symbolic, and metaphysical significance. The extreme heat, sensory deprivation, singing, and restricted mobility in the sweat lodge may contribute to the altered production of biogenic amines, endogenous opioids, and catecholamines, thereby contributing to improved mental states.*

– Stuhlmiller, C.M.

- d. Rituals may be developed in new ceremonies that then become traditions for later generations. Ritual and ceremony have been created in programs for sexual assault victims, child victims, battered women and survivors of homicide victims. An example of such a ritual is included in the appendix of this manual.

*Because therapeutic rituals are intentionally designed to enhance the self-esteem of the participants, they must give more room for the expression of feelings by the individual members. Therapeutic rituals provide specific times for spontaneous, individual actions or comments by members. Therapeutic rituals also allow for greater arousal of the disturbing situation, and therefore for greater emotional catharsis. The content of the threatening situation is less suppressed or cloaked.*

– Johnson, D.R., Feldman, S.C., Lubin, H. & Southwick, S.M., “The Therapeutic Use of Ritual and Ceremony in the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, April, 1995.

- e. Ritual also serves to remind people of their faith and belief systems. It may integrate ventilation through common prayer. But, it can also provide alternative methods of ventilation through actions such as dance, song, or designated tasks. Respect for ritual is a powerful form of communication. That respect can be conveyed by participating in rituals in some cultures or, in others, by non-participation. Intervenor should take care to find out what is appropriate in a particular disaster.

### **III. Ethical Guidelines for Intervenor When Survivors Raise Spiritual Questions**

#### **A. The vulnerability of survivors**

At the time of trauma, many victims are extremely vulnerable to spiritual conversions or changes. Some intervenors may be tempted to respond to such vulnerable states by suggesting new beliefs or introducing new religious ideas. Such behaviors are unethical. A counselor's or intervenor's role is to help survivors develop their own answers to spiritual questions, not to impose the intervenor's beliefs on the situation. Beware of patronizing a victim's beliefs. Beware of others who might use survivors' vulnerabilities for their own purposes. Beware of your own inclinations to offer answers or to help them believe as you do "for their own good." This is not a time to preach but a time to listen.

#### **B. Survivors tend to invest a great deal of trust in intervenors**

Counselors and intervenors are often perceived as parent figures – someone who will know what to do and show survivors how to respond. Survivors may ask an intervenor to judge how they or others acted, to place blame on people, or to interpret symbols, omens or thoughts. Intervenor should give factual information only, not make value judgments on the disaster or its consequences.

#### **C. Involvement in rituals or spiritual practices**

Counselors and intervenors will often be asked or ex-

pected to join in a community's rituals and commemoration ceremonies after a catastrophe. Crisis responders should examine their own beliefs prior to responding to disaster. If their beliefs prevent them from participating in other people's practices, they should make it clear to survivors and community leaders prior to actual interventions and they should try to find an appropriate referral person who may be ready and able to participate if asked.

**D. Intervenors have an affirmative ethical responsibility** to meet the spiritual needs of survivors by finding appropriate spiritual support for them. One agency has recorded written policies and procedures on this obligation.

*1. Our staff will inquire as to whether the victims have any religious persuasion and, if so, do they have a clergy member with whom they would like to talk in the aftermath of crisis.*

*2. With the permission of the client, the staff member will call that clergy member and facilitate a meeting or discussion between the two.*

*3. If the client wants to talk to a member of the clergy but does not want to talk to his or her regular pastor, we offer the option of identifying some other clergy member from their denomination with whom the client can talk.*

*–Rev. A. Robert Denton, "Spirituality and Trauma," in 2001: The Next Generation in Victim Assistance.*

## IV. Spiritual Issues That May Arise Among Survivors After Disaster

The following is a list of spiritual questions that are often asked after a tragedy. They are followed with some possible discussion points or thoughts. It is suggested that responders review the questions in order to assess how they deal with such issues. If spiritual or religious questions make responders uncomfortable or uneasy, they are less likely to be able to deal with them when they arise. The discussion points are presented because, at times, they may be used as questions with survivors to allow survivors to continue to try to sort out their own ideas and feelings. While most crisis teams include members of the clergy to assist in addressing spiritual needs and issues arising after a disaster, it should be emphasized that all crisis team members should be prepared to respond to spiritual concerns. At any particular time, you may be the only assistance available.

### A. "Why me?" "Why is God doing this to me?"

This is one of the most common questions after tragedy. It is particularly perplexing to people who feel they are essentially good people. Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, is devoted to this kind of question. He writes:

*Let me suggest that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not have a meaning when they happen. But we can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them. In the final analysis, the question is not why bad things happen to good people, but how we respond when such things happen. Are we capable of accepting a world that has disappointed us by not being perfect, a world in which there is so much unfairness and cruelty, disease and crime, earthquake and accident? Are we capable of forgiving and loving the people around us, even if they have let us down? Are we capable of forgiving and loving God despite his limitations?*

*If we can do these things, we will be able to recognize that forgiveness and love are the weapons God has given to enable us to live fully and bravely in this less-than-perfect world.*

– Kushner, H., *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, New York, NY:Schocken Books, 1981.

Perhaps one of the more eloquent illustrations of the frustration behind this question are the words of Jesus spoken from the cross, “My God, my God, Why hast thou forsaken me?” (St. Mark, Chapter 15, Verse 34). This echoes Psalm 22, a prayer for deliverance based on the feelings of being forsaken and forgotten.

*My God, my god, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent...I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou has brought me into the dust of death.*

– Psalm 22, Verses 1-2, 14-15

Discussion thoughts:

1. Should the reverse question be asked: “Why *not* me?”
2. Is God the cause of or the solution to our suffering?
3. Is a tragedy cosmically directed at one individual or community?
4. Are there random acts or events, or is there an overarching plan guiding our fate?
5. Is the way to heaven and salvation through suffering here on earth?

**B. “If God is just, why isn’t what happened just or fair?”**

The issue of fairness and justice is also central to the experience of disaster. There is a tendency for people to expect life to be fair even though evidence seems to indicate that it is not.

*Abandoning my expectation that justice must prevail has been my most difficult concession resulting from Mother’s death. Early in childhood I believe I subconsciously began forming my paradigm of the world through which I perceived that good must somehow triumph over evil. Because right was right and wrong was wrong, God must be on the side of those who practiced what was right and good.*

– Davis, J.M., *The Shadow of Evil – Where is God in a Violent World?*, Kendall/Hunt: Dubuque, IA, 1996.

Discussion thoughts:

1. What is the standard for justice?
2. If all were good and just, wouldn’t it remove any choice from our life?
3. Should justice be defined in terms of victims, bystanders, or perpetrators? What is just for one group may not be perceived as just for another.
4. Can true justice be attained in this world?

**C. “Is this disaster an act of God’s will?”**

Sometimes catastrophes are seen as acts of retribution for lack of faith or belief in God. Many religions include stories of people who, because of a failure of faith, suffer extreme consequences. Some cultures explain community-wide disasters as being caused by the invocation of spirits.

There is a legend among the Maori called “Te Ake’s Revenge” that tells of a warrior chief whose young daughter is killed by the incantations of a spurned lover, Turaki-po, a chief of another tribe. Te Ake goes to a great sorcerer to ask for greater powers which enabled him to call the gods to his aid, the gods of earth, sky and ocean. Through the

use of these powers he causes a great whale to be beached on the shores of the other tribe. The tribe quickly works to cut up the meat and feast upon it. For some reason, Turaki-po does not partake of the meal, but all of his tribe does, and by the next morning they are all dead.

*“Ha! Kua ea te mate!” was Te Ake’s exclamation, when the news reached him. His words meant that his daughter’s death had been paid for, that vengeance had been wrought. That Turaki-po had escaped the fate of the rest was a pity, but to the Maori mind it was perfectly just and correct that his tribe should suffer for his misdoings. In Te Ake’s heart there was no possible doubt that it was his powerful karakia that had brought the death-dealing whale ashore at the camp of his enemy’s tribe. And Turaki-po – he, too, divined the hand of the gods in that tipi or death-stroke from the ocean.*

– Pomare, Maui and Cowan, James, *Legends of the Maori*, Wellington, NZ: Fine Arts, LTD., 1930.

Discussion thoughts:

1. How would this disaster serve a purpose of God?
2. In disasters involving human error or cruelty, how can God allow one person to cause the deaths of hundreds?
3. Can we expect to divine God’s purpose?
4. Frederic Buechner suggests there are three propositions: God is all powerful; God is all good; and terrible things happen. Can all three be reconciled?

#### **D. “Why does God hurt little children?”**

Some people can accept the idea of the death of a child easier than the idea that a child suffers pain or agony in the dying process. Most people cannot understand why a small child is victimized or killed in a catastrophe. For some people, the death may be synonymous with the child ascending to heaven, and so they may derive some solace in their faith. However, if the death was painful, the pain is difficult to comprehend.

Discussion thoughts:

1. Is God the cause of any suffering?
2. Is pain necessary in the lives of children?
3. Can pain be avoided in life?

**E. “Why doesn’t God answer my prayers or, at least, send me a sign?”**

As indicated in the chapter on death and dying, many people when confronted with the death of a loved one seek to barter with God. And, in sudden, arbitrary disaster when the consequences of the catastrophe cannot be reversed, they may seek an answer from God indicating why the tragedy happened. They may want God to give them something in return for what is taken away. The question may preoccupy some survivors more if others are perceived to have received answers from God.

*Sister Rejeanne Kelley, a Roman Catholic nun, tells of the home in which she was raised: “My mother had a vigil light and a statue of St. Anthony. When she didn’t get what she wanted, she would blow out the light and turn St. Anthony to the wall. When she got what she wanted, back he’d come and she’d light the candle again.”*

– Kushner, *Who Needs God*

However, interestingly enough, most people do not expect God to answer their prayers all the time even though most think he answers them some of the time.

*Fifty-four percent of adults said they pray every day (29 percent more than once a day). Eight-seven percent said they believe God answers their prayers at least some of the time. An astounding 86 percent said they accept God’s failure to grant their prayers. And only 15 percent said they have lost faith – at any time – because their prayers went unanswered.*

– Kenneth L. Woodward, *Newsweek*, March, 31, 1997.

Discussion thoughts:

1. What type of sign does the survivor seek?
2. Should God answer all prayers?
3. Can you expect to understand God's answers?

**F. "Why is there evil in the world?"**

*Time* magazine ran a cover story on evil on June 10, 1991. It included a thought-provoking description of the evils in the world. The following is an excerpt:

*I think there should be a Dark Willard [Willard Scott, the television weatherman].*

*In the network's studio in New York City, Dark Willard would recite the morning's evil report. The map behind him would be a multicolored Mercator projection. Some parts of the earth, where the overnight good prevailed, would glow with a bright transparency. But much of the map would be speckled and blotched. Over Third World and First World, over cities and plains and miserable islands would be smudges of evil, ragged blights, storm systems of massacre or famine, murders, black snows. Here and there, a genocide, a true abyss.*

*"Homo homini lupus", Dark Willard would remark. "That's Latin, guys. Man is a wolf to man."*

*Dark Willard would report the natural evils – the outrages done by God and nature (the cyclone in Bangladesh, an earthquake, the deaths by cancer). He would add up the moral evils – the horrors accomplished overnight by man and woman. Anything new among the suffering Kurds? Among the Central American death squads? New hackings in South Africa? Updating on the father who set fire to his eight-year-old son? Or on those boys accused of shotgunning their parents in Beverly Hills to speed their inheritance of a \$14 million estate? An anniversary: two years already since Tianammen Square.*

*The only depravity uncharted might be cannibalism, a last frontier that fastidious man has mostly declined to explore. Evil is a different sort of gourmet.*

*The oil fires over Kuwait would be evil made visible*

*and billowing. The evil turns the very air black and greasy. It suffocates and blots out the sun.*

*The war in the gulf had an aspect of the high-tech medieval. What Beelzebubs flew buzzing through the sky on the tips of Scuds and smart bombs, making mischief and brimstone? Each side demonized the other, as in every war: Gott mit Uns. Saddam Hussein had George Bush down as the Evil One. George Bush had Saddam down as Hitler. In most of the West, Hitler is the 20th century's term for Great Satan. After the war's quick obliteration, Hussein hardly seems worthy of the name of evil anymore.*

Discussion issues:

1. Are there natural evils?
2. Are there moral evils?
3. What is the source of evil?
4. Thomas Aquinas said, "The existence of evil is the best argument against the existence of God." How do you feel about that?

### **G. "Who brings God to justice?"**

When people get angry at God, they often want to hold God accountable. Yet there seems to be no way to accomplish that. One way to express the frustration and anger is to reject God and renounce faith.

*I still battle every day with the urge to blame God for this sordid state of affairs, for not intervening for the sake of every person in this world who has to live with the frustration of injustice ... Every time I hear a survivor's tale of tragedy, I battle for the self-control to keep from demanding of God that He do something to stop this madness ... Each day that passes without seeing the one who murdered my mother brought to account for his actions, represents another test of my faith in the ultimate wisdom of God to do what is right in His own timing.*

– Davis, J.M., *The Shadow of Evil – Where is God in a Violent World?*

Discussion issues:

1. What does your faith mean to you?
2. Does your faith allow anger at God?
3. What kind of judgment would God deserve?

#### H. “Why or how should I forgive?”

Many people raised in the Judeo-Christian religions think they must forgive wrongdoers. Some assume responsibility for forgiveness and work emotionally to gain the peace they derive from it. Others choose not to forgive. The issue of forgiveness is one of the most complex spiritual questions for many victims, survivors and intervenors. Judith Herman speaks of the fantasy of forgiveness:

*Like revenge, the fantasy of forgiveness often becomes a cruel torture, because it remains out of reach for the most ordinary human beings. Folk wisdom recognizes that to forgive is divine. And even divine forgiveness, in most religious systems, is not unconditional. True forgiveness cannot be granted until the perpetrator has sought and earned it through confession, repentance, and restitution.*

– Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*

But some have said that forgiveness is therapeutic. If it is, Donna Davenport offers some guidelines to insure that forgiveness does not become relegated to capitulation or destructive anxiety:

1. *The realities of the injury to self and others must be fully acknowledged.*
2. *Self-blame is minimal and mostly replaced by self-compassion.*

3. *Anger to abuser has been fully experienced with a minimum of defenses.*
4. *Greater sense of power has led to a more proactive stance in relation to abuser which at least means the victim has a much greater sense of self limits and a sense of assurance that further injury will not occur.*
5. *Forgiveness is experienced in the context of increased vitality and "appropriate" hope.*
6. *Offender is seen as a complex, three dimensional human being rather than stereotyped and simplified. Dehumanization was a factor in the victimization and if the victim can avoid counter-dehumanization a major psychological victory can be obtained.*  
– Davenport, D.S., "The functions of anger and forgiveness: guidelines for psychotherapy with victims," *Psychotherapy*, 1991

But crisis responders should be careful in addressing this issue. Many intervenors recognize the need to be non-judgmental with victims who are not willing to forgive or resist the question but exhibit negative judgments about those who seek to forgive.

*It is said that after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered, Daddy King called the family together and said that his son's vision of peace would die along with Martin unless they each forgave the murderer. They cried together – they had already cried alone. They grieved together until they could pray. They prayed until they could forgive. Then they knew that even though the murderer killed his body, he did not destroy his spirit and his vision.*

– Rev. Michael T. Mannion, "Making Sense of Victimization Through a Spiritual Vision," *2001: The Next Generation in Victim Assistance*.

Dr. L. Gregory Jones, Dean, The Divinity School, Duke University suggests the need to begin “to learn the steps of a beautiful, if sometimes, awkward, ‘dance’ of forgiveness.” He outlines the following six steps:

*(1) We become willing to speak truthfully and patiently about the conflicts that have arisen.*

*(2) We acknowledge both the existence of anger and bitterness and a desire to overcome them.*

*(3) We summon up a concern for the well being of the other as a child of God.*

*(4) We recognize our own complicity in conflicts, remember that we have been forgiven in the past, and take the step of repentance.*

*(5) We make a commitment to struggle to change whatever caused and continues to perpetuate conflicts and crimes.*

*(6) We confess our yearning for the possibility of reconciliation.*

– Paper prepared for Presentation at the Neighbors Who Care, *Theological Forum on Crime Victims and the Church*, October 10-11, 1997

Discussion issues:

1. Must people forgive others who make mistakes or purposely do harm?
2. What is the purpose of forgiveness?
3. Is it humanly possible to forgive?
4. Do humans have the right or capacity to forgive or is that right and capacity solely God's?

### **I. “Will God forgive me for what I feel?”**

This question usually revolves around feelings of anger – particularly at God. But it may also involve guilt over inabilities to function, or behaviors and actions that seem to be unacceptable. In Morita Therapy used by many Japanese, a key element is the acceptance of emotions and feelings in spite of their intensity. Acceptance of one's feelings can allow people raised in the Judeo-Christian faiths

to understand God's forgiveness or acceptance of them. Consider the fact that most of us believe that violent assaults are wrong. Then did God forgive Jesus when he assaulted the moneychangers?

*And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money changers, and the seats of them that sold doves. And said unto them, "It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.*

*– The Holy Bible, Matthew, Chapter 21, Verse 12-13*

Discussion issues:

1. What wrongdoings are beyond forgiveness?
2. Does God expect perfection?
3. Does God hold grudges?
4. What rituals or prayers might be useful to atone for wrongdoings?
5. Is there redemption after wrongdoing?

#### **J. "Is there life after death?"**

The belief in life after death – or the lack of belief in eternal life – is a critical problem for many people who confront death. Some religions support such beliefs and some do not.

*Many people have asked me to tell them about heaven and the afterlife. I sometimes smile because I do not know anymore than they do. Yet when one young man asked if I looked forward to being united with God and all those who have gone before me, I made a connection to an old memory.*

*The first time I traveled with my mother and sister to my parents' homeland of Tonadico di Primiero in Northern Italy, I felt as if I had been there before. After years of looking through my mother's photo albums, I knew the mountains, the land, the houses, the people.*

*As soon as we entered the valley, I said, "I know this place. I am home." Somehow I think crossing from this life into life eternal will be similar. I will be home.*

– Bernardin, Joseph Cardinal, *The Gift of Peace*, Chicago, IL:Loyola Press.

Often concern about what life after death involves is as troublesome as the question of belief in immortality itself.

Discussion issues:

1. Does worry about lack of immortality cause more or less fear of death?
2. If there is an afterlife, what do you think it is like?
3. Does life after death involve a time of judgment?

**K. "God did this, therefore I am bad;" or "What did I do to deserve this?"**

This statement usually reflects guilt or self-blame. God is often perceived as a parent figure and a disaster is perceived as punishment. Some people may perceive God as a vengeful God and consider their acts subject to immediate retribution. Others may see themselves as instruments of God's will to further a higher purpose.

*O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore. There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me...*

– *The Holy Bible*, Psalms, Chapter 38, Verse 1-4.

*And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind. Jesus answered, "Neither hath the man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of*

*God should be manifest in him. I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And said unto him, “Go wash in the pool of Siloam,” ...He went his way, therefore, and washed, and came seeing.”*

– *The Holy Bible, St. John, Chapter 9, Verses 1-7*

Discussion issues:

1. Does God make an individual an instrument of his punishment for others?
2. Does God use individuals to demonstrate his will and his way?
3. Are the sins of the parents visited on their children?
4. Does God single out certain individuals to suffer?

**L. “Is there good in suffering?”**

Many people feel that if they are to be happy, they must suffer. Sometimes people even worry when everything is going well. They worry about when they’ll have to “pay” for their happiness. In some cultures, the way to salvation is only attained through suffering here on earth. Other cultures may not condone suffering but recognize that it is a part of life and see it as a way of strengthening individuals and communities.

*The Kaddish proclaims that this is a “world which He created according to His will.” Though sorrow may temporarily dull our vision or threaten to rob life of meaning, we affirm that there is a plan and a purpose to life because there is God at the heart of it. Moreover, if we do not permit sorrow to embitter us, we can use it creatively. Sorrow can help us become more sympathetic to the hurt of others, more compassionate toward the afflicted, more sensitive to life’s spiritual values – realities which never die ...*

*The Kaddish challenges the mourner to work for the fashioning of a better world.*

– Adler, D., *We Remember the Holocaust*, New York, NY:H. Holt, 1989.

*If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.*

– Frankl, Viktor, E., *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1959

Discussion issues:

1. Does God require sacrifice as part of redemption?
2. What types of sacrifice are demanded?
3. Are sacrifice and suffering a part of bartering with God for a better life or a better death?

### **M. “Why live in a world full of pain?”**

Suicide is often considered an option after a disaster. Sometimes thoughts of suicide are precipitated by loneliness, or by emotional or physical pain. Some people who want to commit suicide may not do so because of religious teachings or spiritual beliefs. Other people may see suicide as the proper choice in certain circumstances.

*When we have lost everything, when we have no more hope, life is a disgrace, and death a duty.*

– Voltaire

Discussion issues:

1. What will suicide accomplish?
2. What effects will suicide have on other survivors?
3. Is there a way to live with meaning even in the absence of hope?

## **V. Operationalized Styles of Religious Coping Mechanisms Used by People in Trauma**

Robert Denton has summarized the following types of religious coping mechanisms in his paper "Trauma and Spirituality: Structure, Some Research Implications for Intervention and Coping Styles." The summary is based on research performed by Dr. Kenneth Pargament at Bowling Green University. It is included here as an indication of some of the ways people use their spirituality or religion in times of stress and the types of philosophical frameworks they may use to answer some of the above questions. Dr. Denton recommends that intervenors in most circumstances should affirm and build on survivors' coping strategies, but emphasizes that most strategies involve the use of multiple mechanisms. It is also emphasized that the strategies and the supporting mechanism may be changed and altered at different stages in the reconstruction process.

### **A. Benevolent religious reappraisal**

1. Refers to redefining the event through religion or spirituality as something less terrible or less threatening; redefining the event as something more positive.
2. Operationalization: the victim or survivor
  - a. Tries to find a lesson from God in the event.
  - b. Thanks the Lord for the other blessings He has given them.
  - c. Tries to see how God might be trying to strengthen them in this situation.
  - d. Looks for God's greater purpose in the event.
  - e. Tries to view the situation in a spiritual light.

### **B. Seeks God's loving presence**

1. Extent to which individuals seek empowerment, comfort, or reassurance through the love and support of God.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Look for God to be with them.
  - b. Seek God's love and care.
  - c. Pray for God to be with the ones they love.

- d. Seek comfort from God's gentle hand.
- e. Ask God to strengthen their loved ones.
- f. Look to God for strength and support.

**C. Spiritual leaders' or affiliated members' presence**

1. Extent to which the individuals receive emotional, spiritual, or social support from spiritual leaders or others who believe the same thing.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Look for spiritual support from their spiritual leaders.
  - b. Look for love and concern from others who believe the same thing.
  - c. Ask spiritual leaders or members to pray with them.
  - d. Know that spiritual leaders or members are praying for their loved ones.
  - e. Share their fears and hopes with their spiritual leaders.
  - f. Look for support from others with the same spiritual beliefs.

**D. Plea for direct intercession**

1. Extent to which individuals ask God directly for a positive outcome for the event, or asked God for emotional strength or support.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Ask God to take away their pain.
  - b. Ask God to take the pain away from their loved ones.
  - c. Ask God for a miracle.
  - d. Bargain with God to make things better.
  - e. Plead with God to make things turn out OK.

**E. Acts of purification**

1. Extent to which individuals sought spiritual cleansing through religious rituals or acts.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Confess their sins.
  - b. Try to be less sinful.

- c. Ask forgiveness for their sins.
- d. Look for ways to become more spiritual.
- e. Ask forgiveness for the sins of their loved ones.
- f. Try to rid themselves of their impurities.

#### **F. Religious helping**

1. Refers to the ways people use religion or spirituality to help others because of the event.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Share God's love with others.
  - b. Pray with others to help them feel better.
  - c. Pray for others in the same situation.
  - d. Offer spiritual help to their family or friends.
  - e. Pray for other unfortunate people.
  - f. Try to give spiritual strength to others.

#### **G. Conversion**

1. Refers to the extent to which individuals have experienced a dramatic or significant shift in what their religious experience, faith or belief means to them.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Search for a whole new way of being religious or spiritual.
  - b. Look for a spiritual awakening.
  - c. Pray for a reawakening of religious or spiritual feeling.
  - d. Try to find new life through religion or spirituality.
  - e. Try to place much more importance on religion or spirituality in their lives.
  - f. Look for a whole new approach to spirituality.

#### **H. Blaming God or spirits**

1. Extent to which individuals change from believing God is loving and powerful to believing that God is powerless to help in the situation or God is apathetic and not caring.
2. Operationalization of reappraisal of God's love: the victims or survivors

- a. Question God's love for them.
  - b. Feel God does not care about their problem.
  - c. Wonder whether God truly cares about them.
  - d. Feel angry with God for deserting them.
  - e. Question whether God is all-loving.
  - f. Wonder whether God has abandoned them.
3. Operationalization of reappraisal of God's power: the victims or survivors
- a. Question the power of God in this situation.
  - b. Wonder whether God has the power to change the situation.
  - c. Think that some things may be beyond God's control.
  - d. Wonder whether God has the power to intervene in all situations.
  - e. Realize that God cannot answer all prayers.
  - f. Decide that God does not control everything.

**I. Demonic assignment**

1. Extent to which the devil is blamed for the event.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Decide the devil made this happen.
  - b. Feel that the devil is trying to turn them away from God.
  - c. Realize the devil is making bad things happen.
  - d. Feel the devil is at work here.
  - e. Believe the devil is responsible for the event.
  - f. Feel the devil is persecuting them.

**J. Punishment from God**

1. Extent to which individuals see the event as God's way of punishing them for something that they have done; belief that they are being punished by God for their sins.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Feel punished by God for their lack of devotion.
  - b. Decide God was punishing them for their sins.
  - c. Feel that their sins have caught up with them.
  - d. Wonder whether their loved ones were paying for their sins.

- e. Think about what they did for God to punish them.
- f. Feel punished by God for their failings.

**K. Religious avoidance/distraction**

1. Extent to which individuals engage in religious activities to distract themselves or to keep their minds off the event.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Focus on the world-to-come rather than the problems of this world.
  - b. Pray to keep their minds off their problems.
  - c. Think of God instead of their situation.
  - d. Repeat prayers to keep themselves busy.
  - e. Read religious literature to keep themselves occupied.
  - f. Focus on religion rather than their own problems.

**L. Problem solving/deferral**

1. Extent to which individuals hand over or relinquish dealing with the event to God.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Let God decide how to deal with the event.
  - b. Wait for God to take their anxious feelings away.
  - c. Wait for God to take control.
  - d. Let God make sense of their troubles for them.
  - e. Leave their troubles with God.
  - f. Let God provide solutions to their problems for them.

**M. Problem solving/self-direction**

1. Extent to which individuals believe God has empowered or given them the ability to handle the problem.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Try to make sense of the situation without relying on God.
  - b. Try to deal with the problem without God's help.

- c. Decide what the situation means to them without God's help.
- d. Try to come up with solutions without God's input.
- e. Make decisions about what to do without God's input.
- f. Try to deal with their feelings without God's help.

**N. Problem solving/collaborative**

1. Extent to which individuals work or share responsibility with God in dealing with the problem.
2. Operationalization: the victims or survivors
  - a. Work together with God as partners.
  - b. Work to gather with God to think of possible solutions.
  - c. Try to make sense of the situation with God.
  - d. Try to put their plans into action together with God.
  - e. Work with God to find a way to relieve their worries.
  - f. Work together to decide what the situation means.

**VI. Talking with Survivors about Spiritual Issues**

**A. Dos and don'ts**

1. Don't try to explain or give answers to spiritual questions. Most victims know that there are no absolute answers. Most victims will find their own spiritual answers in order to go on with life. They do, often, need permission to confront the questions they are raising and want someone to "understand" that God or their own spirituality is in question.
2. Don't impose *any* spiritual answers on victims/survivors. They do not want to be told that their loved one is better off with God or is without pain now. If they express those thoughts, assure them that such thoughts often are comforting to people.

- Remind them that sometimes such thoughts are *not* comforting in case they are “testing” your reactions.
3. Do help them focus on thoughts of an afterlife and an eternal presence *if that is a part of their belief system*. Explore how the belief may help them cope with the disaster.
  4. Do affirm their right to question their God’s judgment. They may be angry with God. They may feel hate. They may feel betrayed. Anger is documented in the Koran, the Old Testament, the New Testament, Native American religions and others. The anger is part of the search for a new understanding.
  5. Do affirm their search for spiritual answers. If they decide to change their spiritual orientation, that is their choice. Many victims find new hope and new life in a different religion or in a new philosophy of life. Many victims find a new hope in their existing religion or philosophy – it takes time to sort through those thoughts.
  6. Do allow them to discuss issues of forgiveness.
  7. Do affirm the wrongness or injustice of what has happened. This is particularly important when the trauma has been caused by human cruelty or brutality. “The technical neutrality of the therapist is not the same as moral neutrality. Working with victimized people requires a committed moral stance ...it involves an understanding of the fundamental injustice of the traumatic experience and the need for a resolution that restores some sense of justice.” (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*)
  8. Do give them materials that may help them in their search for meaning or their search for a spiritual reality: passages from the Old Testament or New Testament, passages from the Koran, existential literature, and so forth.
  9. Do emphasize that everyone must find their own way of understanding the causes, nature, and aftermath of catastrophe, but if they ask what your beliefs are, tell them as concisely as possible.

## B. Caveats

1. *Victims need an opportunity to piece their lives back together again in light of their religious and spiritual beliefs.*

2. *Victims need to look beyond the immediate here-and-now and take a longer view of their reactions, their feelings, and their lives.*

3. *Victims need permission to discuss religious and spiritual beliefs.*

4. *Victims need to know that God isn't necessarily bashing them over the head and that God will not turn away simply because they are angry with someone and want to kill that person.*

5. *Victims need to know that they do not have to feel guilty for being angry.*

*There is a delightful poem by a Presbyterian minister, Thomas Carlyle, about Emily Dickinson, in which she talks about how people were aghast when she railed at God. Carlyle writes that it's all right to rail because these conversations are acceptable among lovers. We need to let victims know that even their railing against God is acceptable among lovers and friends – the long view.*

6. *Stay away from a lie. If you can't answer a question, don't. A friend and fellow clergy member, Reverend Richard Lord, says, "You know, when people are in distress and asking the hard questions, and when you're up against those questions without any answers, ask yourself, 'If you were in crises, would you want someone to come in with all the answers or would you want someone who is not going to run out on you when times are tough?'"*

7. *You can't speak for God. In all likelihood, if He wants to speak, He'll speak to the victim – and He probably won't tell you what He said.*

8. *Address the forgiveness issue. If you don't bring it up, people are going to be castigating themselves because they feel like they ought to forgive the offender and they feel guilty because they can't. Remember*

*victims need to work out their own thoughts on forgiving or not forgiving – and going on with life in either case.*

–Rev. A. Robert Denton, “Spirituality and Trauma.”

## **VII. What I Want to Say to Clergy: A Victim's Perspective**

[The following collection of feelings expressed by victims was written by Rev. Dr. Richard P. Lord in a paper entitled “Out of the Depths: Help for Clergy in Ministering to Crime Victims.”]

### **A. Don't explain.**

As deeply as I cry out “Why?” I know there is no rational explanation. My “Why?” is more a longing for God to hold me in His arms and give me some comfort than it is a question I want answered. I don't want you to try to give me answers. What has happened is absurd. It is surely not as God intended life to be. It doesn't make sense. God didn't cause it. The devil didn't cause it. It could not have been God's will.

Therefore, let us together try to explain the cause of the tragedy as factually and honestly as possible. I want God, and you as my pastor, as companions who will stand with me in my longings, not as sources of explanation.

### **B. Don't take away my reality**

My pain seems unbearable to me and yet, in light of what has happened, it feels right that I should be in pain. I know it is uncomfortable for you. I know you want to take it away. But you can't, so please don't try. The pain is a sign to me of how much I have loved and how much I have lost. If I have doubts, if I am angry, understand that these are normal reactions to a very abnormal situation. I will not always be like this, but I am now. These are my feelings. Please respect them.

### **C. Stay close**

Just as a one year old child learns to walk with someone close by to steady him when he stumbles, stay close enough so I can reach out and steady myself on you when I need to. Understand my need to grieve, my need to withdraw, my need to agonize, but remind me that you're there to lean on when I want to share my pain.

### **D. Remember me ... for a long time**

This loss will always be a part of me. I'll need to talk about it for years to come. Most people will be tired of hearing about it after a period of time. Be the person who will invite me to share my feelings about this after others have moved on to other concerns. If my loved one has died, mention his or her name from time to time and let us remember together.

### **E. Don't be frightened by my anger**

Anger isn't nice to be around. But it's part of what I'm feeling now, and I need to be honest about it. I won't hurt myself or anybody else. I know my anger doesn't threaten God. People got angry in the Bible. Even God got angry at certain things. The one to worry about is the one who has experienced violence but *hasn't* become angry.

### **F. Listen to my doubt**

You stand for faith, and I want you to, but listen to my doubt so you can hear the pain it is expressing. Like anger, doubt is not pleasant to be around, so people will want to talk me out of it. But for right now, let me express the questions which are measured by the depth of the loss I feel. If I cannot doubt, my faith will have no meaning. It is only as I move through doubt that a more meaningful faith will develop.

### **G. Be patient**

My progress will not be steady. I'll slip back just when everyone thinks I'm doing so well. Be one to whom, on occasion, I can reveal my weakness and regression. Let me be weak around you and not always strong. I'll make it, but it will take much longer than most people think. I'll need your patience.

**H. Remind me this isn't all there is to life**

My pain and my questions consume me. I can think and feel nothing else. Remind me there is more to life than my understanding and my feelings. Speak the word "God," not to dull my pain, but to affirm life. I don't want God as an aspirin but as a companion who shares my journey. Stay beside me and remind me of that Eternal Presence which can penetrate even my grief.

**VIII. Conclusion**

The following description of spiritual relationships in an American Indian culture provides an interesting perspective on life, interconnections, relationships and the continuum of time and nature. The spiritual perspective which differs from and may be interpreted as critical of the Judeo-Christian traditions should serve to remind intervenors of the need to be open and non-judgmental of various belief systems.

*To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their resting place is hallowed ground. You wander far from the graves of your ancestors and without regret. Your religion was written upon tables of stone by the iron finger of your God so that you could not forget. The Red Man could never comprehend nor remember it. Our religion is the tradition of our ancestors – the dreams of our old men, given them in the solemn hours of night by the Great Spirit; and the visions of our sachems, and is written in the hearts of our people.*

*Your dead cease to love you and the land of their nativity as soon as they pass the portals of the tomb and wander way beyond the stars. They are soon forgotten and never return. Our dead never forget the beautiful world that gave them being. They still love its verdant valleys, its murmuring rivers, its magnificent mountains, sequestered vales and verdant lined lakes and bays, and ever yearn in tender, fond affection over the lonely hearted living, and often return from the Happy Hunting Ground to visit, guide, console and comfort them ...*

*We will not be denied the privilege without molestation of visiting at any time the tombs of our ancestors, friends and children. Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people. And the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than to yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch.*

*Our departed braves, fond mothers, glad, happy-hearted maidens, and even our little children who lived here and rejoiced here for a brief season, will love these somber solitudes and at eventide they greet shadowy returning spirits. And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone.*

*In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude. At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.*

*Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.*

*– Chief Seattle, Suquamish and Duwamish Tribes,  
The Indians' Night Promises to be Dark*

# Community Crisis Response Team Training Manual: Second Edition

*Participant's Notes*



## Addendum

### A Liturgy of Cleansing, Healing, and Wholeness

#### Prayer of Invocation

(Participants stand in a circle facing the center point. Hands may be joined in the circle, uplifted in prayer. They turn to each of the directions to pray the prayer of that direction.)

**Leader:** Many and Great, O God, are your things, maker of earth and sky; grant unto us communion with you, you star-abiding one. Come unto us and dwell with us.\*

**People:** Come unto us and dwell with us.

**L.** (Facing east) Hear, Spirit of the East, Great Spirit, source of light, place of the sun's rising, from whom the solar eagle flies through the crack of dawn calling us to prayer for a new beginning and a new life. Great Spirit, come as in the beginning, when at the dawning of the world you came, bringing light and illumination, insight, vision, and hope. Come with all the creatures of your direction, with all that gives light and renewal to our spiritual centers.

**P.** Come, and give to your children what we need.

**L.** (Facing south) Hear, Spirit of the South, Great Spirit of new life and growth, from whose keeping the birds return as they came in the beginning to scatter the seeds of all plants. Spirit of warmth and nourishment and comfort, renew your creative act by making new our emotion-torn hearts.

**P.** Come, and give your children what we need.

**L.** (Facing west) Hear, Spirit of the West, Great Spirit of the sun's declining and setting, spirit of wisdom and old age, spirit of the people's past and knowledge they have gained, doorway to the departing, bring understanding and vision to our darkness.

**P.** Come, and give to your children what we need.

**L.** (Facing north) Hear, Spirit of the North, Great Spirit of the strong winds and the cold, spirit of testing and

ordeal, spirit of discipline and cleansing, spirit of healing and strength, come as in the beginning to empower each of us to once more have control over our own bodies, to bring balance and harmony to the world.

**P.** Come, and give to your children what we need.

**L.** (Facing center) Hear, Father Sky, home of our brother the sun and our sister the moon and of all the wheeling stars, home of the clouds, where the strong thunder begins, home of the rain and snow and the cleansing winds, Great Spirit of the Sky.

**P.** Come, and give to your children what we need.

**L.** Hear, Mother Earth, dressed in the green of trees and grasses, decked with the beautiful flowers, through whose veins the waters run and from whose bounty food is given to all, gathering into your arms all creatures large and small,

**P.** Come, and give to your children what we need.

### **Ritual of Purification and Renewal**

*The Leader may speak words of explanation of this ceremony, such as these:*

Sweetgrass, sage, and cedar are used by different Native people for cleansing and purification. Pipes are purified with sweetgrass before being used for prayer. Homes are cleansed each morning with prayer while smoke from the sage is brought into each room. Smoke from the cedar can be washed over a person to heal a spiritual, emotional, mental, or physical problem. The teaching is that the scent of sweetgrass, sage, or cedar as it rises on the winds is pleasing to the creator. Good spirits are attracted and bad spirits depart.

Many Indian people use water as part of the morning prayer ritual. The grandfathers and grandmothers share that in the old days, as the sun began to lighten the eastern sky, one journeyed alone to a nearby stream or lake. One washed one's body and let the breath of the creator, the winds, dry the water. While drying one stood, arms lifted to the sky, praying and singing, spirit pouring from the body

into the sky to meet a greater spirit above, becoming one with the new light of the new day.

Flute music, or the winds outside, remind us that the song of dawn is also the song of the rainbow, which calls us to complete the circle of life in harmony.

Let us share this ceremony, combining these two traditions into one of cleansing and centering.

*(Singly, each walks forward to the bowl of water, washing the physical body with it. Each moves to the burning sweetgrass, sage, or cedar, to cleanse the spiritual self with its healing smoke. Each washes the smoke over the entire body, concentrating on any area that might need special cleansing. As the community shares this ritual, prayers for all or songs of healing are appropriate.)*

### **Prayer for Going Forth**

**L.** Great Spirit, Creator, behold us! You have placed a great Power where we always face, and from this direction many generations have come forth and have returned. There is a winged One at this direction who guards the sacred red path, from which the generations have come forth. The generation that is here today wishes to cleanse and purify itself, that it may live again!

**P.** We have burned the sweetgrass as an offering to you, O God, and the fragrance of this will spread throughout heaven and earth. It will make the four-leggeds, the wingeds, the star peoples of the heavens, and all things, as relatives. From you, O Grandmother Earth, who are lowly, and who supports us as does a mother, from you this fragrance will go forth. May its power be felt throughout the universe. May it purify the feet and hands of the two-leggeds, that we may walk forward upon the sacred earth, raising our heads to the creator! So be it!

**All:** Your spirits,  
My spirit,  
May they unite to make  
One spirit in healing.\*\*

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\*Originally from the **Dakota Hymnal**; may be found in the **United Methodist Hymnal** (Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1964)

\*\*A prayer by Ojibwe medicine women when gathering plants. From Basil Johnston, **Ojibwe Heritage** (McClelland & Stewart: Toronto, Ont., 1976)

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Liturgy from: **Sexual Assault and Abuse: A Handbook for Clergy and Religious Professionals**, ed. Pellauer, M.D., Chester, B., & Boyajian, J.A., Harper&Row:San Francisco, 1987